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How Much Can We Learn from History?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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How Much Can We Learn from History?

MR. MCBURNEY: Our speakers today are Gray C. Boyce, Professor of History at Northwestern University, Louis Gottschalk, Professor of History at the University of Chicago, and Kimball Young, Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University.

As a nation, and as individuals, we are faced with difficult and baffling problems. Where should we turn for directions, for guideposts, in making decisions? Today we ask the question, "How much can we learn from history?" In other words, to what extent can we profit by past experience in making decisions for the future?

How do you answer this question, Young?

Different Opinions

MR. YOUNG: Well, using history in a very broad sense, we do and must profit by experience, both as individuals and as a group, but as to how much we may learn from history in the more restricted meaning of the term is quite another matter, which I take it we are here to discuss. Certainly there are wide differences as to how much and what may be learned from the past.

MR. MCBURNEY: What can you add to that, Gottschalk?

MR. GOTTSCHALK: I would like to underline the difference between experience and history, speaking of history, strictly, but at the same time it seems to me there is an element of connection between the two.

Every mature judgment on the part of an adult human being is based more or less upon his personal experience and his formal education, and formal education is based largely upon the experience of others. Hence, good judgment is essentially derived from one's own experience and one's knowledge of other people's experience. In other words, decisions regarding present and future conduct—

to the extent that they are the results of reflection rather than of emotional thoughtlessness—are influenced by one's personal or vicarious experience, and history is a common form of vicarious experience.

Unfortunately, there may be, as Young says, a wide divergence of opinion regarding what the lessons of history are. Equally reputable and well intentioned historians have come to strikingly different conclusions regarding what is to be learned from the same historical episodes or developments.

Define 'History'

MR. MCBURNEY: That certainly is true. This raises the question, "What is meant by history?" when you talk about learning from history. What do you mean by history, Boyce?

MR. BOYCE: That's a very good question. It is one I think that we have to try to answer in some way. There are so many different definitions of history. I'd like to choose one, at least, for consideration.

It certainly is a record, and it is a record of the deeds and the achievements—and, I would add, the failures—of men living in society.

I should like to emphasize that phrase, "living in society." However, I think there is something else that we must keep in mind: When we deal with what we call history, we really are dealing less with the subject in itself than a special dimension of all other subjects. History has no matter that is exclusively its own. It does, however, have a method of approach.

MR. MCBURNEY: What do you regard as the primary purpose of the historian? Is it to provide a record of the past, or is it to provide a basis for prediction and a guide for conduct, Boyce?

MR. BOYCE: He certainly must use the

record of the past. He will provide it, of course, in one sense, but he uses it; his primary purpose is to interpret the records of the past.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: I would say that the historian ought to do both; that is to say, he ought to study the record of the past in order to determine, as nearly as he can, what happened in the past, but at the same time, if he can, he ought to be anxious to provide himself and other people with a basis for prediction—or at least for guessing—what the future may be, and to guide people in their conduct in the future.

Guide for Conduct?

MR. MCBURNEY: I think the most important question we have before us is the extent to which you can rely on history as a guide, the extent to which you can take the history of past civilizations, past individuals, and rely on that history as a guide for conduct, as a basis for prediction.

I wonder if we might not get at it by looking at some examples? Take one in your field, Boyce: Can you draw any conclusions about our own country from an understanding of the history of ancient civilizations—Rome, for example?

MR. BOYCE: Of course, you say, "Can you draw any conclusions?" If you mean that you can get an exact pattern from the past and then try to transpose it and apply it to the future, I would say, possibly, no. However, I do believe that any historian would insist that, by studying the past, and studying, let us say, such a large subject as the history of Rome and Roman civilization, you will be able—by studying a civilization in which you can see the beginnings and you can see the ends—to ask yourself some very good and some very searching questions, you then may be able to answer them.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: The trouble is that historians won't agree as to what were the important things about Rome, or why Rome rose to greatness, or declined. Consequently, there might be different lessons that different his-

torians might want to tell about the fall of Rome, and therefore would want to draw different comparisons with our contemporary civilization.

In other words, I think that just as people differ with regard to what lessons they can draw from their own experience, they are likely also to differ with regard to the lessons which they can draw from history. That doesn't mean that there are no lessons in history, but it means that there are different lessons for different kinds of people.

'Individual Opinions'

MR. YOUNG: Does that mean that you haven't any generalization possible in history, that, as Becker put it once, every man is to be "his own historian"? I don't quite see any scientific value in history if it is a matter of that kind of unique interpretation that you apply to it.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: Well, the point that is contained in an assumption like Carl Becker's that every man is his own historian is that every man can look upon history from his own values. That doesn't mean that he is entitled to make up his own history. After all, he has to abide by the evidence of the past.

There is such a thing as a fruitful interpretation of the past, even though the truth may not necessarily . . .

MR. YOUNG: In other words, the Marxists, for example, would have a completely different view, let us say, of the changes in the Roman period than a person of a different political position. History might be thought of as the same, but the interpretation would be different. Is that right?

MR. GOTTSCHALK: That's just my point. Just as you might derive one lesson from a fire in a hotel at which you were present, and I might learn another lesson. You might derive a lesson not to go back to that hotel, and I might derive a lesson not to go to any hotel; so people might easily learn different lessons from the same historical episode, not in their immediate past but in some remote past.

MR. BOYCE: Young, I think we should

emphasize what Gottschalk said some time before, and that is that every historian looks at the past and assays those questions which interest him. In our present civilization we are very much interested, for example, in matters concerning economy or concerning the social pattern of life; we therefore would ask questions which would not be those asked by a man in the midst of the 19th Century, who would be interested in constitutional and legal developments or perhaps more interested in those.

'Different Questions'

MR. GOTTSCHALK: And assuming that these men had all been equally respectful of the truth, they might get answers that were right and yet different, because they were asking different questions.

What I would say is that the scientific value of history, in so far as history as a social science is concerned, is that you can get a number of different answers from the same kind of data, all of which might be true again in the future, although it might also be true that none of them would be true in the future.

In other words, examination of the historical events in the past might give you a number of answers, any one of which—or none of which—might be anticipated for the future. It would give you the opportunity to anticipate possibilities rather than make predictions of a necessary event or outcome.

MR. YOUNG: In other words, any use of history would have to be a use made within the framework of a contemporary problem which had some resemblance to the situation in the past, but not necessarily identity.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: Any use of history as a social science.

History, of course, has its own use, which is an understanding of the past, but any use of history as a social science would have either to draw parallels of some present situation with a past situation, or a continuation of some past development into the present, and possibly into the

future, with a view to trying to anticipate how that future development will work out.

MR. MCBURNEY: We are discussing some of the limitations of history as a guide for prediction and in conduct. Let's see if we can explore those a bit more specifically.

'History Repeats Itself'

You often hear, Professor Boyce, the old statement that "History repeats itself." Does history ever repeat itself?

MR. BOYCE: If you want a categorical answer, I would say no, it does not repeat itself, because history deals with the unique. It deals with the particular. You've got to remember that you are dealing with time and space and change.

MR. MCBURNEY: Which suggests, of course, the weaknesses involved in these historical analogies.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: While I agree with Boyce that history is unlikely to repeat itself exactly, nevertheless there are things in history that have remarkable resemblances, one to the other. For example, we do know that there have been dictatorships at various times, that there have been revolutions at various times, that there have been wars at various times. We can establish a certain set of categories in which we can put certain events in history, and we can ask not only what is unique about these, what makes them different from each other, but also what makes them similar, so that they are all called wars, for example, and dictatorships, and it is quite conceivable that we might be able to generalize about them to a certain limited extent.

MR. YOUNG: Seems to me that unless we can do that, we can't learn anything from history in the sense that we have been discussing it up to this point.

You do have the problem, in science, of recurrence. Now, that recurrence may be within certain limitations, as just indicated, but in the case of dictatorships or in the case of the

"cycle of revolution" if you want to use that term, we do find some amazing parallels.

The question will come up, "Can we learn anything in interpreting, let us say, some of the contemporary situations in dictatorships, and so on?"

MR. GOTTSCHALK: I think we can. It's a grave question among historians as to whether it is the business of the historian to do these comparisons or point out contrasts—whether it isn't the job of other people using historical material. That's what I think Boyce meant when he said that history was essentially a method which anybody could use, and not merely the historian's.

But it does seem to me that even the historian, if he wants to, if he wishes to become a social scientist to that extent, can point up these similarities and try to indicate what similarities are to be expected in the future.

Dangers

MR. MCBURNEY: When he undertakes that job, what dangers do you see involved? What precautions would you suggest he observe?

MR. GOTTSCHALK: Well, for one thing, it would seem to me that there are certain things that are definitely qualitative in nature, certain things that you can't easily measure, and about which you have to exercise judgment. When you talk about categories, for example, like brotherly love, as some sociologists do, and try to measure them, you are going to have a very tough job.

I would say that there are some things that you can measure, like populations and like prices, that the historian can very well give you information about, and other things that you can't measure and that have to be used very carefully if you're going to draw any kind of comparison.

MR. BOYCE: I certainly would agree with Gottschalk and with Young when they talk about categories dealing with these various large periods of various large ideas in history. I do

think we must emphasize, however, that we are dealing with probabilities, and that we are not like the scientist in a laboratory who can, with reasonable assurance, know what he is going to get when he puts certain elements together under similar conditions.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: And may I add that you are dealing with probabilities of thinking human beings, who, as soon as any generalization might become true of them, are likely to want to avoid it if it is something they should avoid, or to emphasize it, and therefore act that way more regularly if it is something they should emphasize.

Time Limitations

MR. YOUNG: Now, there is another aspect of that, too, that interests me. It seems to me that there are some limitations, some time limitations, you might say, upon what use you can make of history. Take the case of the relationship of population to resources. We have ample evidence of recurrences in history where the population has pressed upon the resources of the country, with important changes resulting. But unless you circumscribe any generalization to be made in terms of time—for example, the period of the ancient Greeks or the ancient Chinese, or ancient Rome—you will be in difficulty. Yet within a given framework of time you could say, "Well, other things being equal, and they approximate that, we're likely to find this kind of cause-effect relation developing somewhere else in the world and at another time."

It seems to me you can do something with that kind of prediction in use, but that it has a certain historical limitation to it.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: I think what you are saying, Young, is that history, like all the other social sciences, goes on the assumption that human beings have been much the same throughout the course of man's knowledge, and as a consequence that they can be expected to react under similar circumstances in much the same way.

MR. YOUNG: Well, as far as the test of motivation, and the basic (what was once called) "psychic unity of man," I think we have to start with some such premise as that. After all, we've had conflict, cooperation, and what sociologists call "differentiation" in every society. The particular form these take, however, will be determined by historical rather than by psychological factors. At least it seems so to me.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: I think you are right, that they will be determined by the situation at a given time; in other words, the historical setting. At the same time, I don't think that makes it easy. I won't contend it makes it impossible, but it certainly doesn't make it easy to prognosticate what is going to happen because of similarities of the present situation with something in the past, for no other reason than that the present situation has not yet worked itself out; otherwise, it wouldn't be a "present" situation. And the past situation is finished, and it's hard to compare an unfinished situation with a finished one.

Technological Influence

MR. YOUNG: I don't know what you mean by a finished situation, but if you mean it in the sense of the contemporary changes going on, those certainly cannot be foretold.

The case of the use of atomic energy, for example, is a good illustration today. We don't know what the potentials are for technological changes, to say nothing of the use of these things for weapons.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: That's a situation I find very difficult to handle, largely because it's a technological situation, but if you're dealing with persons—for example, dictatorship, which was mentioned before—if you're trying to find out what would happen to Stalin, for example, because he is a dictator, it seems to me that there you have many possibilities in the past. He might be a Caesar, he might be a Robespierre, he might be a Cromwell, he might be a Napoleon, but which

one he was going to be would depend upon what, in fact, was going to happen to him, and you couldn't tell what was going to happen to him from the comparison that you might choose from the future, in the past. You might choose one of several comparisons.

MR. BOYCE: Seems to me a good deal of what you've been saying is elaborating upon the acceptance of the presupposition that men are fundamentally alike. I certainly—myself—would want to accept that with a good many reservations.

I'm wondering, suppose we took such large categories as Oriental civilization and Occidental civilization; could we have reasonable assurance that an Oriental man in an Oriental civilization would react in the same way to similar stimuli?

MR. YOUNG: I think there is no doubt about that in terms of the basic, fundamental motivations of men. I think what happens, of course, is that people learn, and they learn within these given historical and spatial circumstances, but people have to eat in the Orient, and they make love, and they have children, and they have to rear them. There are all kinds of common, universal factors that you can't get away from.

'Learning Differences'

MR. BOYCE: But take an attitude toward such a fundamental thing as the value of human life. There we have a great difference among Oriental peoples and Occidental peoples.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: But those are learning differences. Those are differences that one learns. Fundamental human nature must be the same if the historian is going to be able to understand evidence. That is to say, he has to assume that a normal human being will testify in a certain fashion; otherwise he has no way of judging the value of any evidence, and it doesn't make any difference whether that evidence is by an Oriental or by an Occidental, whether it is by an Eskimo or by a Hottentot. As long as he is human, he ought to be able

to report what he sees and hears and smells and tastes, et cetera, like anybody else.

MR. BOYCE: You say he *ought* to be able to. My question is *will* he, and *does* he?

MR. YOUNG: I think he does.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: I think he does, or at least you understand him well enough so that you can make allowances for the different things he has learned, for his ethical and learning status.

MR. MCBURNEY: Young, let me ask you this question: How do you think this historical method we have been discussing is related to the experimental method?

MR. YOUNG: I should say that from the point of view of science, they have something in common. As I understand historical method—at least, as some people have used it—it might be thought of as an attempt at reconstruction and, using the concepts of cause and effect for the moment, you could then trace the relationships of some prior events to some subsequent ones; in other words, cause and effect. And by reconstructing what has happened in the past, you might be able to arrive at some, at least, probable or possible generalizations about it for projection into the future. In this sense the experimental method and historical method are not too unlike.

'Ifs' of History

MR. GOTTSCHALK: There is a point that it seems to me is pertinent in this connection, and that is that the historian frequently engages in what he calls the "ifs" of history; that is to say, he tries to reconstruct history as it might have happened if you took out an important element. For example, what might have been the history of Europe if Waterloo had been won by Napoleon instead of lost by Napoleon?

Of course, that's very unsatisfactory, because different historians will make even wider divergent guesses, more widely divergent guesses there,

than they will with regard to what actually did happen. Yet it does come close to being the same sort of thing that happens in the laboratory when you drop out one important element in order to discover what the result would be without that element in your experiment.

MR. YOUNG: And it's perfectly legitimate, it seems to me, at least in laying out the function of history, to indulge in this kind of thing, within the controls that are possible.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: And the fact that so many historians are likely to agree despite wide divergencies as to what might have been the case if something that did happen had not happened. That would seem to indicate that the method is not altogether fantastic.

MR. BOYCE: It is not fantastic, and it is frequently very suggestive, but of course, again we have to remember, when you make reference to the laboratory, that the historian cannot perform his experiment and test it over and over. It is a hypothesis which cannot be tested in the way it can be in the laboratory.

'Recurrent Factors'

MR. YOUNG: Yes, but the recurrent factor in history is, in a way, the test, and while repetition is limited, as indicated here already, it isn't completely impossible within certain limits, to find some recurrences in history. Otherwise it seems to me you cannot draw on history very effectively for scientific generalization.

MR. BOYCE: Always remember the limits.

MR. MCBURNEY: Aren't the men who make use of history likely to forget the limitations imposed by these limited recurrences?

MR. YOUNG: Yes, we either get the extreme of Henry Ford, who said history is bunk, or you get the person who completely depends upon it in a somewhat fantastic way in assuming a high degree of predictability.

MR. MCBURNEY: In other words, is a man who relies on history likely to take sufficient account of change and

relativity and limitations in these recurrences that Young is talking about?

MR. GOTTSCHALK: The trouble, McBurney, is that nobody relies on history. What happens is that the people come to ask certain questions of history, and they usually look to history for arguments to support the ideas and prejudices that they already have.

MR. YOUNG: You mean they use it only for rationalization.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: They use it for rationalization and rhetorical purposes. They don't actually try to learn from history. For that reason, history is rather in a sorry position when it comes to teaching lessons, because, while it probably has lessons to teach, there aren't very many people who are willing to learn from history.

MR. BOYCE: I think McBurney's question raises another aspect of this that we might consider. You say "the person who relies on history." If you are thinking of a man placed in the responsibility of determining or helping to determine foreign policy, for instance, if he is to be successful, it seems to me that what he must do himself is to become the historian. That is to say, he becomes truly oriented in a historical sense, and he is himself a good historian trying to do the historian's work as best he can.

MR. YOUNG: Do you think the knowledge, for example, of the diplomatic and other relations between this country and Russia would help the present Secretary of State to handle the Russians any better?

MR. BOYCE: Yes, because I think he would understand the Russians better, and that is most important.

Study by Military

MR. GOTTSCHALK: I might point out that Generals are more likely to use history successfully and well than statesmen, because Generals—officers and war colleges—make it a business to study previous battles.

I recall a statement by one of the

leading biographers of Napoleon Bonaparte that he almost never went into a campaign without studying the history of previous campaigns in the area in which he expected to go.

MR. YOUNG: Seems to me that is a very good illustration of this point I tried to make a little while ago—the limiting factors that have to be taken into account.

Now, in every staff school, as you know, they do go into the history of battles, and so on, and they deal with both strategy and tactics, and there is a recurrence in these, and when you have the same terrain, for example, you have a lot of additional examples of recurrent factors. Here is a good illustration of some usefulness in history.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: But, of course, what you are dealing with when you deal with battles is something that you can measure—that is to say, casualties, and which army retreated and which army stayed in the field—and therefore you know what the end is that you are trying to achieve when you are dealing with a battle or with prices or with populations. But when you are dealing with foreign policy, for example, or with revolutions, you have ethical problems there—what is good and what is bad—and people will differ as to what is good and what is bad, and therefore as to what they should learn from a previous example, as to whether the previous example was desirable or undesirable.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you accept those limitations, Boyce — the suggestion that there are certain areas or situations in which history is more useful — relatively more useful — than others?

'Difference in Values'

MR. BOYCE: Yes, I think that is something that we would all agree to. It seems to me that in terms of the moral order, you do have very definite limitations as to what you can learn from historians in that sense, because every man, again, is going to make his own interpretations, and we have to reckon with that. I think that is very well

illustrated in our relations with Russia today, in that their particular position and point of view are different from ours in terms of values, and one of the problems of communicating with them is dependent, itself, upon this.

MR. YOUNG: That would be true not only of what you call the moral order, but it would certainly be true of the economic order, because people would have a very different attitude toward what is an ideal economic situation.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: And of the philosophical order, because they have an altogether different attitude toward history from most of us.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you think history should be used for the purpose of developing attitudes, Gottschalk?

MR. GOTTSCHALK: No, if you are talking about history in America. I would certainly say that I think the purpose of history, as taught by historians, at least, ought to be to try as nearly as possible to find out what is true and what is false.

MR. YOUNG: I disagree with that. It seems to me that in terms of the great mass of people, history's function, in part, has been to induct people into the value systems of their particular society. I don't anticipate that the teachers of history are going to jump suddenly into courses of historiography and the examination of evidence so that people will be able to look into their own world. It seems

to me you can't get away from the value aspects of teaching history.

MR. BOYCE: Well, there is a value there. That is, you can have your teacher of history—particularly for the younger student—explain the nature of the society in which he lives, and the background of that society. There is a difference, though, in that you must be very careful to emphasize that difference between authoritarian interpretation — between history as propaganda and the value of history.

MR. YOUNG: I don't think you can get away from history as propaganda in the value system.

MR. BOYCE: I think you must.

MR. YOUNG: I don't think you can get away from it.

MR. GOTTSCHALK: If Young is talking about what is likely to happen, I would say he is using history well to prognosticate. I think he's right in saying that we won't get away from propaganda in history, but the question you asked me, McBurney, was what do I think ought to be done, and I say what ought to be done is to teach history as truthfully as possible. I don't think that you can ask people, for example, not to detect the errors in their own past, because if you would . . .

MR. YOUNG: Let me take a concrete case.

MR. MCBURNEY: We'll not have time, Young, to take that concrete case. May we close on this interesting and somewhat controversial note?

Suggested Readings

Compiled by Eugen Eisenlohr
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
Deering Library, Northwestern University.



AUSUBEL, HERMAN. *Historians and Their Craft: A Study of the Presidential Addresses of the American Historical Association 1884-1945*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1950.

Six major issues have been discussed during these sixty years; the usefulness of history, history as literature, facts in history, the science and philosophy of history, individuals in history and history as a broad and rich inheritance. General agreement has been reached on the final issue but there is still some dispute over the preceding five.

GEYLE, PIETER and others. *The Pattern of the Past: Can We Determine It?* Boston, Beacon Press, 1949.

A critical evaluation of Toynbee's *Study of History*. A sociologist and a historian point out fallacies in Toynbee's analysis.

GOTTSCHALK, LOUIS REICHENTHAL. *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1950.

Mr. Gottschalk discusses evaluation of historical writing with regard to the writer's motives, philosophy, style and scholarship and considers the application of the historical method of study to social questions. He discussed the techniques of conducting research and examines historical theories.

HALLOWELL, JOHN HAMILTON. *Main Currents in Modern Political Thought*. New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1950.

An interpretation and analysis of the main currents in political philosophy since the 17th Century.

KOHN, HANS. *The Twentieth Century, a Midway Account of the Western World*. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1949.

An investigation of general trends in modern history through the tracing of the fall of nationalism in the 20th Century and the development of imperialism, racialism, Fascism and Communism.

RENIER, GUSTAAF JOHANNES. *History: Its Purpose and Method*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1950.

A treatise on the meaning and methods of history and historians.

ROWSE, ALFRED LESLIE. *The Use of History*. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1948.

Since the life of man in society is a special field of history, we can learn from the experiences of others in history.

SARTON, GEORGE. *The Life of Science: Essays in the History of Civilization*. New York, Henry Schuman Inc., 1948.

A study of the history of science may help produce better scientists. By becoming familiar with past mistakes and victories, they may gain a better understanding of present problems and future possibilities.

TOYNBEE, ARNOLD JOSEPH. *Civilization on Trial*. Oxford University Press, 1948.

Thirteen essays discussing various problems facing the world. Toynbee's thesis is: "The universe becomes intelligible to us only as far as we are able to understand it as a whole."

Foreign Affairs 29:248-62, Ja., '51. "Historians in a Revolutionary Age: The Interwar Years." M. BELOFF.

An analysis of the mode of thought during the period prior to World War I to the present.

Forum 112 no. 6:325-7, '49. "Britain's Course of Decline." R. G. COWHERS.

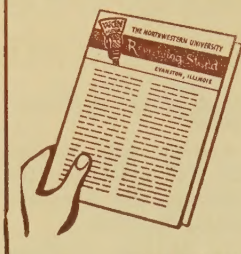
The underlying reason for the decline of Great Britain lies in her changing conditions of wealth and population. Britain has failed to keep up with the technology of the times and the past two major wars have almost exhausted her physical and material resources.

Journal of Philosophy 46:342-51, My. 26, '49. "Theory of History; a Co-operative International Project." B. WOLMAN.

A study of the relation of history to such allied fields as sociology and philosophy. Included is a discussion of the four main fields of history: epistemology, methodology, reconstruction of the past of historiography and historiosophy.

National Educational Journal 39:117-18, F., '50. "World History in a World Society." E. B. WISELEY.

Spectator 182:73, Ja. 21, '49. "Impressions and Facts." R. BASSETT.



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